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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS HANOI 000118

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: GVN LAUNCHES INVESTIGATION INTO CATHOLIC CHURCH PROTESTS

REF: HANOI 097

¶1. (U) Summary. The Government of Vietnam (GVN) announced that it is seeking legal action following ongoing Catholic prayer vigils and protests seeking the return of church lands in downtown Hanoi confiscated after the communist takeover in 1954 (reftel). The Church says it intends to take action against government-controlled media outlets for distorting the truth and attempting to intimidate peaceful worshippers. As neither side appears to be backing down, the standoff appears set to continue following the holiday week of lunar new year. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Lieutenant-Colonel Nguyen Manh Hung, from the Hanoi police central Hoan Kiem district investigative unit, signed a decision on January 26 to launch a criminal investigation into the alleged crimes of damaging property, causing social disorder and assaulting public officials. The police launched the investigation following an incident during a prayer vigil on January 25 after a woman climbed over the gate into the courtyard and attempted to lay flowers (reftel). She and a male lawyer claimed to have been beaten by guards, whereas authorities said the two assaulted public security personnel. Protestors then scuffled with security guards, tore down billboards posted on the fence and broke down the gate to the property.

¶3. (U) According to Catholic News services, the GVN is conducting legal investigations of Archbishop Joseph Ngo Kiet and several other clergymen, accusing them of abuse of power and inciting their followers to confront the government. Church leaders in Hanoi believe the investigations are an attempt to intimidate individuals, following the failure of the government to intimidate Catholics as a whole. Further, the Hanoi Archbishop's Office stated that it would render complaints against Hanoi Television and the Hanoi Moi and An Ninh Thu Do newspapers for running distorted information about the case.

¶4. (U) Catholic parishioners have continued to defy the authorities' demands that they disperse, and have maintained a presence on the property under rain shelters and tents since the January 25 incident. Tuesday evening, January 29, more than 100 people again defied authorities, praying and singing hymns on the disputed property, where they have erected a large white cross and placed candles and flowers on the building's steps and walls. The crowds put up rain shelters and lit fires against the winter chill on the 2.5 acre property, which the Hanoi People's Committee has used as a community center and for parking motorcycles.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: As the standoff continues, neither side appears to be willing to blink. The Church looks unlikely to be cowed by threats, ultimatums, and police investigations. Meanwhile, the GVN is seemingly struggling for a way to bring the gatherings to an end without relinquishing the land, losing its grip on authority, or drawing further international attention and/or condemnation. With the lunar new year or "Tet" holiday approaching, we expect many of those gathered will return to their homes and villages to pass the

lunar new year with family, giving both sides a bit of breathing room. The test for the GVN will come following Tet (the week of February 11). If the Catholic Church manages to regain its current momentum, the GVN will be back in the same tight spot. End comment.

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